

## #11: Precautions for Worship (Ecclesiastes 5)

Written by Bob Stone

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### **How to have a meaningful listening and worshiping experience and avoid the speech and sacrifice of fools.**

In Ecclesiastes 5 we have a very potent encouragement as to "how to we can have a meaningful listening and worshiping experience and avoid the speech of fools." This passage makes it very clear that worship is to be entered into with forethought and with certain precautions. It is rare to see any reference to prayer or worship in Solomon's writings, but in Ecclesiastes 5, he holds nothing back. In a quiet tone, but with razor-sharp words, Solomon gives us some cautions for prayer and worship.

#### **Ecclesiastes 5:1-7**

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, "My vow was a mistake."

Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

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Whereas this passage is a very serious and awesome warning, I also see in it a wonderful call to a meaningful listening and worship experience; one that many of us may have been too busy to enjoy and benefit from. The positive benefits of this passage will help us answer these questions:

- Can I have a worship experience that is meaningful if singing is not my thing?
- How can I grow in the content and depth of my worship experience?
- Are there guidelines to keep my worship from becoming meaningless to God and to me?
- What preparations should I make before I worship?

### **The Precautions for Prayer and Worship Listed** **Be careful when you come near.**

v. 1a—"Guard your steps when you go to the house of the Lord."

We are reminded very quickly in the opening words, that an Old Testament believer didn't mosey in casually and flippantly and say, "God, I'd like You to do something for me" (see Lev. 15:31). As Christians living under the New Testament, we operate under grace and not the law, but this instruction should remind us of several things:

It reminds us of the price Jesus paid so we can boldly enter into God's presence. Heb. 10:19-22 explains:

19] "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20] by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22] let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

Verse 22 is an allusion to the Old Testament sacrificial system of washing and cleansing. Verses 19-21 remind us that the purity God requires today is made possible by Christ. Even with the New Testament provision, however, we need to be prepared and careful as we draw near to God. We find many warnings in the New Testament about meaningless, pious words and treating lightly what is holy (1 Cor. 11:27ff; Matt. 7:21ff).

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We don't take Solomon's caution in Ecclesiastes 5 as just a piece of Old Testament harshness, then. Some just throw out the Old Testament as though it had nothing to say to us, with the idea that living in grace cancels out the need to approach God carefully. The very concept of grace however, if understood, calls for confession, gratitude and humility (and confession, gratitude and humility aren't casual or flippant).

What are we to do when we come into God's presence for prayer and worship? Solomon highlights several more precautions.

### **Come near to God to listen, not just to speak.**

v. 1b—"Go near to listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong."

We should know as we draw near to God that He is communicating, so we should find the means and the time to listen. The word "listen" has the double force in Hebrew which it sometimes has in English—**pay attention** and **obey**! It is very close to the famous words of Samuel in 1 Samuel 15:22—"...to obey [literally, to listen] is better than sacrifice."

What are the ways to listen in God's presence (or, how does God communicate to us)? If all of our worship is singing, we may not listen as we should. If we listen carefully, we will have new content and even new means to bring about our verbal/singing worship to God. If we have the right preparation and attitude, and listen carefully, here are some ways God can and does speak to us:

1. Reading Scripture—Psalm 119: 97-104
2. Worship (God speaks in worship)—Isa. 6:1-9ff
3. Solitude/Silence—Mark 1:35
4. Meditation on Scripture or on His character or attribute—Psalm 100:3,5
5. Reflecting on creation—Psalm 19:1; 95:1-5
6. Journaling/writing our prayers, thoughts and praise—the book of Psalms
7. Study—Psalm 119:7,54, 62,171-172;19:7-8
8. Dreams/visions—Isaiah 6:1-9ff
9. Inner witness—Ps. 37:4; Jn.. 10:2-4; Acts 10:19
10. Gifts of the Spirit—1 Cor. 14:24

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11. Affirmation/encouragement from others—Acts 15:32;17:22; I Thess 4:18; 5:11; 2 Tim. 4:2
12. Rebuke —Prov. 1:23; 3:11-12; 25:12
13. Illness—Psalm 119:67,71,92 (read)
14. Open/closed door—1 Cor. 16:9; Acts 16:6-7
15. Reflection on our salvation—Psalm 40:1-3
16. Visual arts—Acts 17:16
17. Communion elements—1 Cor. 11:23-26

God speaks to those who listen, and He does so in a variety of ways. Many of us do not hear Him because our ears are not attuned to His voice, or we are too busy talking. It's essential we learn to listen so we may add new words, thoughts and encouragement to our worship, prayer and action.

During every worship service and throughout the week, God speaks to many of us, but we may ignore His voice, or cover it up by continuing to sing, or by inner thoughts. We must learn to listen! Oh, the joy of listening in God's presence. I'm not talking about becoming hypersensitive to bad pizza, or hearing God speak through fortune cookies. I'm talking about being so often in His presence that we know His voice. Jesus says, "My sheep ...will listen to my voice"  
—John 10:16.

What should we do after He communicates with us? Obey!

Matt. 7:24—"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

James 1:22-25—"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23] Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24] and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25] But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."

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What does God think of the person who does not "Go near to listen?" Look again at verse 1:

God is not impressed with the sacrifice of fools.

v. 1b—"Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong." What is the sacrifice of fools? It could literally mean ordinary sacrifices that are made by fools, but the context indicates the word "sacrifice" is used figuratively to mean "foolish verbosity" (fools who offer up prayers and worship that are wordy and insincere).

Solomon's target is the well-meaning person who likes a good worship service and turns up cheerfully when the church meets, but who listens with half an ear and never gets around to what he has volunteered to do for God. Solomon twice calls the person in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 a fool. (These are Solomon's words—not mine!) This is a scathing word and should shock the religious churchgoer, or casual listener. This states very clearly that to be casual or involved in repetitious religiosity is wrong, a sin; a foolish thing to do! People say, "Oh, he's very religious," but religion without obedience is foolishness. This will not go unpunished, as we will see in verse 6.

Now let these words kind of settle in. Are you listening? The scary thing Solomon is saying, is that these foolish people don't *know* they do wrong. v. 1b—"...who don't know they do wrong." This is unwitting foolishness, but that should be no consolation. Some of us could, even now, be acting foolishly in God's sight and not know it, or we may not know until now. We thought God was pleased, or overlooked our flakiness, but He doesn't!

It is important to see that the sacrifice of fools is not received—it doesn't help! Most importantly, we miss the "I love you; I have wonderful plans for you..." etc. To avoid the sacrifice of fools, then, and be prepared for what God has for us, Solomon gives the next precaution:

**Be slow to speak or communicate in your heart to God.**

v. 2—"Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything

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before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."

This is not a prohibition on words, or prayer, or worship; it is a caution about foolish talk, hypocritical words, superficial religious action. Limits are put on the foolish talk, not the *length* of our prayers. The Scriptures, in fact, encourage us to intercede and pray continuously, e.g., 1 Thess. 5:16-17; Gen. 32:26. The Psalmist also encourages much singing, praise, thanksgiving (Psalm 100).

This passage isn't the total picture of what prayer and worship is all about, as some have thought. Read the whole counsel of God on worship, and don't use this passage as an excuse for not worshipping or not using words at all.

The point of the passage is, we will not hear if our vocal cords are working overtime, and God will not receive the sacrifice of fools.

### **Be aware of where God is and where we are.**

v. 2b—"God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."

When we pray, we can be easily tempted to forget our earthliness and begin to boast like the Pharisees did in one of Christ's parables—Luke 18:9-14.

"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

When we pray, it is easy to forget who we are and who God is, and presume to tell God what to do; that's what a fool does! How arrogant can we be?

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- Where is God? v. 2b
  - Where are we? v. 2b
  - What should that say to us?
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So when we pray or worship, let's not say or sing words in an arrogant, or disrespectful manner. Let's not be passive and listen with half an ear, as if we have God's concerns covered by just showing up to church and doing religious things. Let's thoughtfully consider what we are singing and saying; the best way to do that is to listen! Let's remember who we are and who God is—where we are and where God is. Let our words be an honest expression of our heart, not endless attempts to impress or convince God.

Now in case we haven't gotten the message, Solomon gives us three illustrations of what ignoring this instruction is like.

### **The Precautions for Prayer and Worship Ignored—**

vv. 3-4. What does it feel like, sound like, and lead to?

**It feels like a dream that comes when there are many cares.**

v. 3a—"As a dream comes when there are many cares..."

This is a little obscure, so let me give it my best guess.

This may mean that we experience dream after dream at night following a busy day with an endless to-do list! For me, this is like the irrelevant and minute details which often accompany my dreams when I am burdened, overly tired or on medication. This is what a foolish person's worship sounds like!

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Can you relate to this? Have you ever had dream so bizarre it had no purpose... that exaggerated a real event until it was ridiculous... that was nonsensical or repetitive?

Solomon gives another illustration of what it sounds like if we don't listen:

**It sounds like the speech of the fool.**

v. 3b—"...so the speech of the fool when there are many words."

Just like 5:1b—"Go near to worship rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools." This is how praise and worship sounds from one who ignores the precaution; it sounds like the speech of a fool. Like an unwanted dream with extra and irrelevant, unnecessary, and burdensome details, so is the speech, the worship and prayer of a fool. The prayer of a fool is unnecessary; it isn't wanted or needed.

This is what God and the angels may say about some of our prayers. "Listen to that—amongst all that beautiful worship and authentic prayer to Me, there are several speeches from fools."

But again, remember the scary thing—a fool doesn't know he's doing wrong (v. 1b). The fool may think God is impressed with his words, or the fact that he showed up at church for worship, but God is not impressed! God doesn't just listen to our words, He looks at our heart. He knows what we are up to, what is motivating our words.

He's not after perfection, however, just honest reflection.

What do you think?

1. How many of us gave foolish speeches in the last worship service we attended?
2. If we don't know, how will we find out?

We must

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1. examine our hearts;
2. examine our purpose for prayer and worship;
3. examine our concept of God—where He is and where you are;
4. examine our words—are they extraneous? Are they designed to impress God or others? Are we trying to persuade God? Are we just going through the motions without thought, sort of half there?

I want to avoid the speech of a fool!

This passage is similar to Jesus' advice on prayer in Matt. 6:5-7—"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6] But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7] And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

Those who pray loudly in public in order to get attention have received their reward—v. 5. When we think we'll be heard because of many words, we're wrong. It's babbling—v. 7.

**It will lead us to promises/vows to do more than we can and/or intend to deliver.**

v. 4—"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it."

Paraphrase: "Do not get carried away with religious fervor, and do not make promises you cannot or do not intend to keep." If we are not listening, but are being phony, we may get carried away with our words. In the emotion of worship, or in a time of desperate need, we might make vows to God in order to sound more sincere, or to try to convince Him to help us. ("Lord, if you'll just get me out of this, I promise to go into the ministry." "Lord, if you'll heal me, I'll give the rest of my life in service to you.")

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If we vow or promise God something, He takes it seriously. Ananias and Sapphira lied and experienced the judgment of God when their vow was not carried out—Acts 5:1-12. It would have been better had they not vowed at all, or even if they had promised only a part of their land. But they decided to fake it.

It is a sin to make the speech of a fool and not carry out a vow. v. 6a—"Do not let your mouth lead you into sin."

We can't say it was a mistake. v. 6b—

"And do not protest to the temple messenger (probably a temple messenger sat to collect what was vowed), 'My vow was a mistake.'"

Don't try to worm out of a decision you made before God by saying, 'Oops, I made a mistake.'" Deuteronomy 23:21 says,

"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord will some day require it of you"

—Deut. 23:21.

Solomon says, in essence, that we will receive God's anger and the logical consequences of our action by making vows we don't intend to keep. v. 6c—"Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?"

Ouch! God is not impressed with unkept vows and promises. Think of how that applies to the person who is without biblical grounds for a divorce. "The marriage vow is not a mistake." Think of how this affects the material goods of the person who doesn't keep his promise to his boss, or his financial obligations, e.g., paying bills.

How many have seen failure in their lives because they promised God they would give Him 1/10 of their income, but at the first sign of having to stretch, ignored the promise? Think of the person who ignores his/her promise of faithfulness and devotion to a spouse, and has an affair? We should understand that in Christ there is forgiveness if we repent, but we must acknowledge the sin of breaking a promise and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

If we fail to repent, we're making the speech of a fool every time we worship in a gathering of believers, and every time we pray. If we don't get our hearts serious before God, we will experience God's displeasure, anger and the destruction of the work of our hands.

What will keep us from getting into this place? What will cure our tendency toward

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promises without follow-through? Here is the answer.

### The Proper Stance Encouraged

v. 7b—"Therefore stand in awe of God."

The fear of God, the reverent awe of Him keeps us from at least three things seen in this passage: meaningless words, spiritual flippancy, and unmet promises. The person who has an awe of God, the fear of God

1. Listens differently
2. Prays differently
3. Worships differently
4. Promises differently
5. Speaks differently to others
6. Gives God pleasure

To sum it up, the problem is one of theology. If we don't know God, we try to fake it with Him, to impress or persuade Him; or we don't listen to Him. If we do know God, we stand in awe of Him, knowing He knows our very thoughts and plans. If we know God, we sometimes can't say anything, because what *doesn't* He know? If we know God, we easily kneel, raise our hands and worship Him, believing His beautiful and eternal plan will ultimately be seen in our life. If we know God, our praise is the sacrifice of a priest, not a foolish person!

Are you standing in awe of God?